

So I received a letter from the Bishop. It said "Dear Rev Bentley", not a great start I thought. "I have been hearing about what has been happening in Christ Church recently and how at services you have been accentuating people's differences, focussing on where people come from and their cultural differences. It seems to me that, in such emphasis on differences, your Sunday services do more harm than good!" - oh dear!!

Now just in case you are concerned I didn't actually get a letter like that. If I had I would be seriously worried. However, if the Bishop, or the Moderator, or the Circuit Superintendent, had been party to what has been happening here at Christ Church over recent weeks then they may have heard that we have been look at what divides us. We have recognised that we do come from different nations and, as we saw last week, that we do have different cultural backgrounds. However, we have done this only to show that in Jesus we have a real unity and that under him as our head we are one body. We are one body and never more so than when we come to the communion service as we do today. However even as we come to this service we recognise that there are divisions. In the passage we have had read 1 Cor 11:19, speaking of the Lord's supper Paul wrote "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval". As we come to communion there are differences, some will come forward to take bread and wine certain of their standing in faith in Jesus. Others will come for a blessing not sure for various reasons that as yet they are ready in their faith to receive communion, while others will stay in their seats out of personal choice perhaps because as yet they know they are not followers of Jesus or because today they do not feel able to share in this remembrance of the death of Jesus. So there is, even here, some divisions. However, for the most of us we come and share in bread and wine and despite our different backgrounds and cultures we do it as one body to share one bread and one cup. We do this as equals no matter how long we have been following Jesus or how strong we feel in our faith. We are one and we are equals because this service above all others proclaims that we are sinners in need of forgiveness and that our only means of being forgiven is through the death of Jesus Christ which we remember in this service.

The communion service is a great point of unity for us as Christians and so it is right that as we think together about 'Growing in Christ' in our sermon series this term we come to look at the Communion and we do it through this passage of 1 Cor 11. However, in Corinth we see that, rather than creating unity, their times of sharing Communion or the Lord's Supper were times of division. So Paul wrote to them, v17 "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good" – oh dear!!

In 11:2 he had praised them for observing various things he had passed on to them about public worship but now the tone changes. Remember this is not a Bishop but the Apostle and founder of the church who was writing. What a devastating thing to say “your meetings do more harm than good”. Their coming together as God’s people were doing more harm than good!

### **1. what was the problem v17-22?**

Well it is hard to say exactly what was going on but as we look at the language Paul uses we see both the issues in general terms and how Paul viewed them.

In v18 he says “when you come together as a church there are divisions among you”. We ask what were these divisions and how did they show themselves? In v20 Paul says when you come together it is not the Lord’s supper you are eating”. So clearly it was as they “shared” the Lord’s supper that these problems were occurring. Then we get a hint of the problem in v21, “for as you eat each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry another gets drunk.”

It would seem they had a meal in which the Lord’s supper was set and that some were eating even before others had arrived, perhaps the rich before the slaves got there. Then some had too much and others not enough. However we understand it, it doesn’t sound too good does it?

I’m looking forward to the bring and share lunch after the 10.30 service but this sounds like me saying that those who actually live in Chineham will get the first run at the table and then others can come and see what’s left. The good thing of bring and share is that we do just that and it acts as a means of all being equal in what we can eat and have. Here in Corinth the situation clearly was different with some having and others not.

Paul made it clear what he thought, v22, “do you despise the church and humiliate those who have nothing?” He seems almost speechless at their behaviour. What they were doing was bad enough but in the setting of the Lord’s supper – well it was unbelievable.

See what Paul was saying here, that to act in a way which denies the unity of the church and which demeans other Christians is an offence against the whole church. Cut the leg and the whole body hurts. But then Paul made it clear that when we sin against another person we also sin against God. So in v27 “whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord”. That is they are in the same position as those who put Jesus to death in the first place so rather than the Communion being a celebration of salvation it is a place of condemnation for their sin.

I don’t know whether you are aware that recently in France there has been a spate of clowns attacking and injuring people. Now that is a parody of a clown who is meant to entertain and make people laugh yet these are doing just the opposite. What was happening in Corinth was a parody of communion, the opposite of what it should have been.

## **2. the nature of the meal v23-26**

Paul gave them a reminder of the Communion meal, the Lord's supper. It is just a brief edited version of what had taken place in the upper room on the night before he was put to death.

"He took bread" (v23). This was the unleavened bread to remind those sharing the Passover meal of the events of the Passover which took place to free God's people from slavery in Egypt. "He broke it" (v24). This is the symbolism of his body being broken on the cross but also a practical thing of breaking the bread so that each person shares from the same bread, a unity in sharing in the death of Jesus. "He took the cup" (v25). The cup is the symbol of God's wrath and judgement which Christ would take for us and so free us from the penalty of sin and death. As he took the cup Jesus said, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood" (v25). Through his death peace has been made between God the Father and his people.

As Paul spells out the events of that first Lord's supper, he is explaining the purpose of repeating it, which is there in v26, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

The Communion is a proclamation of Jesus' sacrificial death. Based on the Passover meal the idea clearly was that it would be a regular, though perhaps more than once a year, event at which the death of Jesus and its significance for his followers would be both remembered and proclaimed.

We come to this meal to proclaim that God has died for our salvation. I hope whether you are here today or listening to this on download you know that.

His death was what Jesus wanted his disciples to remember and the Communion meal was the means of remembering.

I hope we can see the importance that Jesus invested in this and so the importance to the church of this regular remembrance of the death of Christ.

However alongside the Communion as a means of remembrance it was also a means of stating unity.

At the last supper it would have been one piece of unleavened bread and one cup that was shared by all who were there. I know we come from different backgrounds and have different ways of sharing communion but, however we prefer to do it, we recognise that this is a sharing. As we share bread and wine we recognise that we share in the benefits of the death of Jesus and that his death unites us as one family all born again by the Spirit as children of God.

However, as we have been seeing, this aspect of unity was being undermined and even denied by what was happening in Corinth and so Paul says "It is not the Lord's supper you eat" (v20).

So how were they to put this right and what might we need to do to ensure that we have the right attitude and actions as we come to communion?

## **3. getting it right v28-34**

**a. the actions** that they needed to take are spelt out in vs33-34. The problems arose from the meal that went with the Lord's supper and so in effect Paul says look if you are going to meet and eat then at least wait until everyone is there together. However, he goes on, if you can't do that and you can't ensure a fair distribution of food for all it is better that you eat at home so that "when you meet together it may not result in judgement". Because they were treating each other so badly they were risking God's wrath. As we look at v30, Paul suggests that perhaps some of the bad things happening may be seen as a temporal judgement on them because of the way that they were despising the church.

Their actions spoke of their attitudes towards other Christians. Paul tells them to sort out what they were doing but along with that there needed to be a change of attitude.

**b. the attitude** and this is where I think this passage speaks to us. Paul's command to them was very clear in v28&29, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself."

We need to get right what Paul is saying here in that this is not a call to deep introspection as to whether we are worthy of coming to the table to receive bread and wine – the bottom line is that none of us is worthy and yet we are all worthy. Access to the table is there for all, the sinful, the weak and the weary! One does not have to get rid of the sin in one's life in order to partake. Here by faith one may once again receive the assurance that Christ receives sinners.

So Jesus calls us all to come. However we should examine ourselves in terms of our attitude towards the body of our Lord that is his church. Am I in good standing with my brothers and sisters in Christ? As we were thinking last week do I accept them in Jesus even though we have different backgrounds and ideas? Then from a few weeks ago, have I been reconciled with any who I have upset? Can you see what Paul is saying here? Rather than have an attitude that the others don't count, having an attitude which asks the question am I fully in fellowship with those with whom I am sharing this communion meal. It speaks against a casual participation at the table by those who are not ready to obey the gospel and live under the rule of Christ and in harmony with his body.

The Communion service is a point of unity and that means our attitude needs to be right and so the call of Paul is to examine ourselves and the implication for them and us is that if we realise there is something wrong then to ask God's forgiveness and, where possible, put that right so that we eat the bread and drink the cup in a manner worthy of our Christian calling.

In a moment we are going to share bread and wine and we do it together as we remember the sacrifice of Christ on the cross for our salvation. We welcome to the Lord's table anyone who will come in humility and seek God's grace and forgiveness. Do come and share in bread and wine but

before we do that there will be space for us to reflect on where we stand with our brothers and sisters in Christ and, if necessary, to seek God's forgiveness for wrong attitudes we may have held. As we do this may the result be our growing in unity under Christ and that our meeting together does more good than harm.